

Multimodality of Learning in Higher Education: Issues and Challenges

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Introduction

In today's borderless and globalised world, educators are often faced with the arduous challenge of preparing undergraduates with appropriate competencies and practices so that they can cope in workplaces which are increasingly technologically-driven. Globalisation is placing new demands on the kinds of 'literacies' we need in the workplace as much as in the communicational demands of everyday life. Universities, through their educational activities of discovery, shaping, achieving, transmitting, and applying knowledge are expected to take the lead in promoting the transition by challenging present and stimulating future scenarios. Kellner (2000: 245) stresses the importance that 'if education is to be relevant to the problems and challenges of contemporary life, it must expand the concept of literacy and develop new curricula and pedagogies'. In the global marketplace, the higher education sector must provide an essential infrastructure with which a country can harness from the perspective of creative technological expertise. Thus, with greater emphasis on a 'knowledge industry', institutions higher education learning will be expected to give relevant importance in the area of teaching, in order to cater for new developments of the broader community.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996; 2001) have challenged the notions of traditional literacy's importance on print as a result of the tremendous growth in the role of multimodal texts and digital technology. They highlight that a print-based pedagogy solely is inappropriate to cater for the demands of the existing information age. This is viewed in the light of 'the screen' and multimodal texts that are developing new ways of analysing, critiquing and engaging in texts. This phenomenon rules out the traditional notion of sole dependence of the meaning-making process based on written texts as the main source of interpreting information. However, this view does not overlook the skills of reading and writing of print-based texts but supplements the idea of literacy in line with a new era of digitalisation. Education in higher education is responsible in addressing the fact that undergraduates engage in the multiple modes of communication which must be taken into account as relevant steps towards equipping them with appropriate competencies that are vital to go beyond academia in order to prepare graduates for the world of work.

Multimodality: Context, Background and Focus

The screen is now the culturally dominant medium in many parts of the world, and for many members of numerous societies around the globe (Johnson and Kress, 2003). Similarly, when learners conceptualise,

experience, apply, and analyse multimodal texts, the learners are required to use linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural and spatial design elements (Cope and Kalantzis, 2001).

Technology enhances literary practices through multimodality where the visual design element extends, enhances and communicates meaning with new modes like Power Point presentations, Video Papers, hypertext, blogging and other website-related activities that promote and develop literacy skills of undergraduates. The multimodality framework that encourages the usage of on-line technologies as a tool for autonomous learning promotes the skills of reading for comprehension, asking a question, sharing an opinion in public forums, giving advice, sharing knowledge, conducting surveys, post summaries and original research. Besides that, participation of undergraduates in collaborative projects will involve them working with people in different places, creating webpages and websites individually and collaboratively, through effective combination of texts, graphics, audio, video and other media in hypertext format.

In this context, Pandian (2003) perceptively points out that literacy and new media technology complement each other in a multi-channelled learning environment where literacy practices extend beyond community and country borders in new and exciting ways. He further stresses that:

"educators are responsible in thinking, planning and managing new persons for new communities... In addressing the new times, we have to ensure that the term literacy goes beyond technological advances that are linking the world ever more closely, to focus on knowledge and its creation – as dimensions linked to economics, politics, culture, religion, environment, social justice and peace to ensure the well being of each nation and the wider world" (p.66).

Pandian (2003) highlights the evident fact that literacy practices should be challenging, and that educators play a significant role in creating avenues for confronting new times and preparing undergraduates to face challenges for employment in the present digital age. According to Pandian (2003), a study which investigated undergraduates' engagement with computers among 675 Universiti Sains Malaysia students unveiled some interesting patterns which indicate that computer literacy among the respondents in the study was high. This suggests that undergraduates do favour the use of literacy practices

that are multimodal in nature, where screen is a preferred mode of reading than page.

Issues and Challenges Faced by University Teachers

Making Learning Learner-centred

One of the key challenges in a higher education setting is undergraduates' learning has been encapsulated as to be focused on content and learner-centred. Kaur (2001) adds that the contemporary revolution, confronted with the mushrooming of technological advancement, has opened up avenues for network information retrieval by students and educators through channels of multimedia like the internet, computer conferences, listservs, relational databases and other innovations.

Using a Multimodal Pedagogy in the Classroom

In preparing the nation's future competent workforce, it makes good sense then to equip undergraduates with diverse competencies that are vital in response to negotiating with the rapid and expanding changes in information and communication technology. In this light, technological tools must be viewed as an essential and important element in today's classroom pedagogy where a multimodal pedagogy can be significant in promoting effective and real-life learning. Creative tasks can be structured and scaffolded to provide more opportunities for students to communicate their ideas.

In spite of several potentially limiting conditions currently prevalent in many university contexts (with regard to ICT implementation as a policy, availability of resources to fund the incorporation of technology in lecture theatres, etc.), the benefits of using multimodal texts in upgrading students' learning repertoires are here to stay.

Using Resources Effectively

In adopting the Multiliteracies approach, university teachers and students must possess the ability to be able to critically assess and evaluate texts using technology as a means to engage in literacy. They need the ability to use such resources effectively and creatively in their associated cultures by reading and to critique them in the process, to appropriate and redesign them as well as to be able to actively envisage and contribute to transforming social practices as they judge the text.

Academic Dishonesty

This could be the result of a new learning culture or university culture; other factors include undergraduates' poor mastery in English, their misunderstanding about the concept or academic

conventions of referencing and their ignorance of the unit's requirements. Therefore, educators have to emphasise and create a sense of awareness of the seriousness of plagiarism and its implications in academic writing.

Pressures and Constraints Affecting Academic Staff

University teachers are constantly challenged with limited time factor as they have to meet the traditional demands of academic research, teaching, supervision and administrative activities. As a result, academic staff are pressured with little time left for developing and using ICT in teaching. This problem needs to be overcome, in order to promote better literacy practices, promote creative thinking skills and problem solving skills among our students. Undergraduates must be encouraged to engage in multimodal texts during lectures and course assignments as this will motivate them to be active receptors of knowledge who can chart their goal towards more independent thinking.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions should be able to provide the context for change that reflect the values, needs, and structure to affect a transformational change. Improving the quality of teaching and learning practices is significant in upgrading the standard of graduates in preparation for future workplaces in the present scenarios of the new knowledge and innovation economies. In spite of several potentially limiting conditions currently prevalent in many university contexts (with regard to ICT implementation as a policy, availability of resources to fund the incorporation of technology in lecture theatres, etc.), the benefits of using multimodal texts in upgrading students' learning repertoires are here to stay. There are important lessons for university teachers who have intentions to make student learning more situated in the real world and in doing so, helping students to deal with multimodal texts that will "challenge students intellectually and emotionally" (Hamston, 2006: 48).

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